

PRISCILLA'S PRESENTS

Astro, Seer of Secrets, in a New Series of Stories



THE winter afternoon had wrapped itself in darkness before Astro spoke. He had bent for twenty minutes over the chessboard, vividly illuminated by an overhead electric lamp, while Valeska's keen eyes watched him attentively. Outside, the clanging of bells and the rattle of carts had grown gradually fainter as the falling snow spread a blanket over the pavements. Within the palmist's studio the two were surrounded by shadowy objects enlivened with twinkling lights caught on the polished points or planes of embroidered patterns or ornaments.

Suddenly he rose and switched on a blaze of light. The whole picturesque splendor of the apartment blazed in color, from the heavy tones of the oriental rugs to the gilded coffered ceiling. The walls, half lined with books, surrounded the luxurious furnishings of the studio, which in their elegance and rarity gave the place almost the air of a museum.

"Mate in seven moves!" he announced. His pretty assistant wrinkled her brows in the attempt to analyze the game. For weeks she had been studying with him the mysteries and complications of the Muzio Gambit, and, though she was well along with the logistics of the play, his extraordinary imagination made him able to keep many moves ahead of her mentally. She sighed whimsically and looked up at him. He put his finger on a black ivory piece as he spoke with a droll look in his eyes.

"It all came because of your absurd fondness for the knight!"

"I admit that I am partial to knights," she replied. "I'm always willing to exchange a bishop for one."

"I wonder why?" Astro mused. "No doubt because the knight's move is symbolical of a woman's way of thinking. She loves to jump over things in the logical path of reasoning: one move ahead and one diagonally to the right, one backward and one to the left, or anyway rather than along a straight line." He laughed a little cynically.

"And do men never think that way?" she asked demurely.

BY ALAN BRAGHAMPTON

Drawing by George Brehm

He put his chin in his fist and nodded his head, shaking his waving black hair. "That's queer, too. They do, sometimes. There are types that do, races that do; orientals, for instance."

"And aren't you oriental?" she asked.

He walked away suddenly and picked up his little white tame lizard from its silver cage. "Oh, Egypt is hardly the Orient. Egypt is—well, it's Egypt, the eternal mystery."

He turned quickly to her. "I never believed you were Irish," he said. "I wonder what you are?"

"Pure troll!" she said nimbly.

"I have solved many mysteries," Astro replied, and now his voice was softer: "but you are the most mysterious of all. Somehow, I hate to know too much about you. Well, let's call you a troll." He picked up the mouthpiece of his narghile.

A BELL tinkled. Valeska, after a glance at the Master of Mysteries, pressed a button on the wall. In a moment a boy in buttons entered, carrying a salver, on which were letters. Astro took them up and spread them on the table under the lamp. Valeska looked playfully over his shoulder. Then, with a queer expression on her expressive face, she seated herself.

"All from women!" she commented. "I wish—"

"What?" The seer wheeled in his chair.

"Never mind." Valeska took up a book.

Astro rapidly opened the envelopes and cast them aside one by one. The last, a letter on heavy blue paper, he read a second time and tossed it over to Valeska.

"Read it aloud," he said. "I want to think."

Valeska read as follows:

MY DEAR ASTRO.—You will remember, perhaps, having read my hand, some months ago, and having told me some most wonderful things about myself. It was all so marvelous to me that I thought you might be able to help me

in a funny thing that has been happening for the last five weeks or so. Of course I apply to you in strict confidence, and I hope you will understand.

"Oh, cut all that part out," Astro interrupted, "and all her feminine circumlocutions! Get to the business!"

Well, then, five weeks ago last Saturday I received a mysterious present of a pair of beautiful slippers. I had no idea where it came from; but supposed it was from a Mr. Thompson, who has been rather attentive to me. But he denied it. The next Saturday I got another parcel, by mail, containing a lovely bound leather album, beautifully painted. Then I suspected Mr. Gerrish; but he has denied sending either. Since then, every Saturday I have received a parcel by mail, every time a different thing, and I'm simply wild to know who is sending these things. If you think you can find out for me, I'll be glad to pay you whatever fee you charge, as I can't stand it not to know any longer. If you'll make an appointment, I'll come and see you any time.

Yours sincerely,

PRISCILLA QUARICH.

"Isn't it lovely?" Valeska exclaimed. "It's a welcome relief from the murders and robberies and things. I'm glad that there are some benevolent criminals."

"Slippers—album—" the seer mused. "Too bad she didn't mention the other gifts."

"Why? Do you think it's so very mysterious? It's romantic, of course; but—"

"Five Saturdays in succession—" Astro went on thoughtfully.

"Slippers are a funny present," said Valeska. "You have to know the exact size, of course."

"Thompson—Gerrish—" Astro rose. "This should be your field, Valeska," he said, smiling. "My specialty is the intricacy of the human brain. You ought to know about the human heart. Of course it's a love affair."

"And of course you know nothing of love," she added.

He tossed the black locks from his brow and gazed at her thoughtfully. "No—of course not." His voice was low; he did not look at her.

Then he threw off his mood. "Write her in answer

Valeska, to this effect: In order to settle this rather delicate question for her, I shall have to meet the two men. Suggest that she invites me to dinner and has them there. You'll be invited, of course. Suppose we make it next Friday. Also, ask her to send me a complete list of the gifts she has received to date, in chronological order."

THE next day a letter came from Miss Quarich in reply to Valeska's note. She said that, as her butler was usually away on Fridays, she would prefer to have the dinner on Thursday. "And," she added, "do, please, bring that pretty Miss Wynne, if she will pardon my informality in not calling myself to invite her. But I'm so busy—" etc.

On Thursday evening, therefore, Astro's brougham bore the two to Miss Quarich's residence on upper Lexington-ave. They were admitted by the Japanese butler, and, entering the drawing room, found the two men of the party already waiting.

Thompson, the elder of the two, was a typical man about town, bullet headed, red faced, with cropped red mustache, and of a jovial, magnetic temperament. Care had scarcely rubbed elbows with Tom Thompson, and he was full of the gossip of the day, cordial, hearty, and evidently innocuous. Gerrish was more suave, with a clever head, egg shaped, smooth shaved, with a sensitive mouth and smiling eyes.

A moment after, Miss Quarich appeared, attired in the most modern of Empire gowns, revealing her slim, lithe figure and beautiful neck. She was young and merry, with dark eyes full of coquetry. She welcomed Valeska with a little, patronizing snuggle, and held out her hand to Astro, who bent over it and kissed it gracefully. Then their eyes met, and Miss Quarich blushed. It became her charmingly. Valeska, meanwhile, had turned to the men, and her eyes and wits were busy. Sam, the Japanese butler, came in with cocktails on a tray. Neither of the women indulged; but the men drank their healths, each with a characteristic compliment. Then they went into the dining room.

As Sam, with the crisp, impersonal, quiet dignity of his race, passed from one guest to another serving, both Astro and Valeska watched the two other guests sharply. The seer showed himself thoroughly *au fait*, as always when he accepted such social invitations.

Once or twice, during the meal, Astro's eyes sought Valeska's, with a questioning expression. The faintest possible shake of the head was his only answer. The two men divided their attention between Miss Quarich and Valeska Wynne with discretion and tact. The talk ran on in social commonplace, of the theaters, of the newspaper topics of the day, of sporting events. That Astro was anything more than the merest society butterfly, or the favorite of the moment, no one would have suspected. Yet again and again he shot his shrewd look across the table at his assistant, and his glance in their secret language pointed her attention to many things.

AFTER the sweets, the women retired up stairs to Miss Quarich's private sitting room for their coffee and a few moments of relaxation.

"Well?" said Miss Quarich, passing her golden cigarette case to Valeska.

"They're both immensely interested in you, it seems to me."

Miss Quarich's brows rose. "My dear," she said, "it struck me that you came in for some notice also."

Valeska smiled. "But I don't expect to receive a present from either of them on Saturday, however."

Miss Quarich sat up with animation. "It's great fun, of course," she said; "but it's tantalizing. I would never suspect either of them of being romantic. Of course I've had loads of flowers and books and all that sort of thing from men, and both of these have been, as you say, interested—and attentive. In fact, each of them has come dangerously near to—a refusal." She laughed merrily.

"Do you recall having mentioned the size of your shoe to either of them?"

"Not at all; though either might have found out, if he tried hard enough."

"And about the album?"

"Oh, I recall having mentioned one I saw, one night at dinner when they were both there. I must show it to you." She rang a bell at her side, and shortly a maid appeared. "Stebbins, will you bring that album on the table in my room, please?"

When it came, Valeska examined it interestedly. It was made in imitation of the Renaissance volumes that are still decorated and sold in Siena. The board covers were gilded and painted with quaint pictures of knights and castles, and were bound with leather thongs, fastened with silver headed nails. Inside were pages of tooled leather, with apertures for photographs. The slippers were also brought, of golden and blue embroidery of a quaint design. But, despite her close scrutiny, Valeska could find no distinguishing mark to hint at the place of their manufacture.

Miss Quarich handed them back finally to Stebbins. "Wrap them up neatly with the other things on my table, and give the parcel to Samugi. Tell him to give them to Monsieur Astro when he leaves the house. Now, my dear," Miss Quarich said, turning to pour out a cordial, "we must hurry down stairs. We have been here long enough. I want to hear Astro read the hands of the two men. It ought to be fun. Oh, here's the list of presents up to date. You can give him that yourself."

ASTRO and Valeska left the house early and drove directly to the studio. She was animated with interest. The mystery was pretty enough to excite her feminine enthusiasm. Astro laughed at her; but refused to discuss it till she had entered the studio and opened the paper Miss Quarich had given her, and displayed the whole collection of presents. The list was as follows:

November 7, pair of slippers; November 14, album; November 21, volume of Montaigne; November 27, umbrella; December 5, six pairs of gloves.

Astro first handled the objects taken from the parcel, and then looked over the list. For ten minutes he said nothing, walking up and down the dim apartment in silence. For a few moments he stood by the window, staring out, thinking. Then, with a smile illuminating his countenance, he returned to the table, glanced again at the list of gifts, and chuckled.

"To-day is Thursday," he remarked. "The day after to-morrow, Miss Quarich will receive—can you guess what?"

"Of course I can't!" said Valeska. "What?"

He dropped his chin into his fist. "Well, she will receive a present of an inkstand; probably of cut glass."

"Really?" Valeska stared at him in amazement. "Yes, unless he sends another book, which I think unlikely."

"He? Who?"

"Do you mean to say you don't know?"

"How can I? Why, how can you, either? You haven't even examined the presents. There's that volume of Montaigne's Essays. It would be like Mr. Gerrish to send that; but more like Mr. Thompson to send the gloves. I'm all at sea."

Astro patted her familiarly on the shoulder. "After all my lessons!" he complained humorously. "Never mind, think it over. And look over that list again to-morrow, when you're rested."

THE next day, however, brought no hint to Valeska, who, in the intervals of her work, examined the articles one by one, and pored over the list of presents. On Saturday, Miss Quarich rang up the studio. Valeska, in high excitement, listened, and then stared at Astro with a baffled expression. "Miss Quarich received this morning a parcel containing a cut glass inkwell!"

Astro laughed silently, and nodded.

For sometime Valeska stood gazing at him with a blank look on her face. Then, without a word she went to the table, took up the list of gifts, and, as if mesmerized by Astro's unspoken thought, sat down, took a pencil and began to write:

Slippers
Album
Montaigne
Umbrella
Gloves
Inkstand.

"What is that Japanese butler's name?" she demanded.

"Why, Sam, isn't it?"

"You know it isn't. It's Samugi. But how did you know? I only happened to hear Miss Quarich mention it."

"Well, I inquired. I often ask questions. So you've solved the acrostic?"

"Yes, the initials read 'Samugi,' of course. But what does it mean?"

Astro yawned. "It is difficult to interpret the oriental mind; almost as difficult as to understand feminine psychology. What did I tell you the other day? It's a mental knight's move, an indirect message. We'll have to wait."

"But fancy that Jap having the nerve to take such liberties with Miss Quarich!"

"That Japanese is, as I have succeeded in finding out at the consulate, more than Miss Quarich's social equal."

"But he's only a servant!"

"In New York, yes. In Tokio, he's a noble of an old Samurai family. His father is an army officer on General Oku's staff. So may Samugi be, for that matter."

"Then why is he taking a servile position here?"

"Oh, that is done very often. Who knows the reason? Not I, nor do I care. Perhaps he's an army spy, perhaps he's writing a sociological book on the American millionaires, perhaps he is sent by his Government for private reasons. But most likely of all he is simply desperately in love with Miss Priscilla Quarich, and has taken this devious, oriental method of pressing a hopeless suit."

"Hopeless?" Valeska's eyes snapped.

"Of course. The question now is, What are we to do about it? If Miss Quarich finds out, she of course will have him immediately discharged. The only thing is to wait till we get his message definitely."

Valeska tossed her head and walked away. "So you consider yourself an expert in the human heart, after all?" she said jauntily, as she put on her furs.

"I confess I don't know much about yours," was his retort; and then, as he watched her out of the door he added slowly, "I wish to Heaven I did!"

THREE weeks elapsed, Miss Quarich having been put off from day to day on one excuse or another. But each Saturday a new gift had been received. On December 12 it had been an exquisite inlaid mother of pearl lorgnon. On the nineteenth she had received a magnificently set opal, and the

next week a huge box of violets arrived, fresh and fragrant from Morley's. The tenor of the message was now growing evident. According to the presents so far received, it read, "Samugi lov," and it needed little shrewdness to construct from that the probable declaration: "Samugi loves you."

The elegance and costliness of the gifts had already confirmed Astro's opinion of the Japanese condition. It was evident that he had not only birth and social position at home, but wealth as well. He had been shrewd enough to send nothing edible, such as confectionery, which might immediately arouse distrust. His tact was, indeed, most delicate. Should Priscilla Quarich disdain his advances, she need only pretend not to understand the acrostic. He was wise enough not to want to subject her to the embarrassment of refusing an overt offer, in case she should be prejudiced against the Orient. He actually did, it seemed, wish to be loved for himself alone, as the song has it, with no aid from his possession of noble birth.

It became, therefore, a delicate question as to how and when Miss Quarich should be informed of the solution of her problem. As she did not press for it, however, Astro let the matter wait awhile, hoping to receive word from her of the gifts that might come. No letter came, however, and he expressed surprise to Valeska.

"I'm not at all surprised," she remarked.

"Please write to her for an account of what she has received since the violets came, and in what order," he said.

This Valeska did, and, in a few days received the following answer:

MY DEAR ASTRO.—I had almost forgotten that I had asked you to unravel my little mystery, and I'm afraid now that it is hardly worth your while spending much time on it. As you ask, however, I'll tell you that I have received, since I telephoned about the violets, a copy of "Undine," an emerald, a pair of opera glasses, and some other things. Please don't bother about it. It really doesn't matter much.

Yours sincerely,

PRISCILLA QUARICH.

Astro whistled. "I confess I don't know what to make of that," he exclaimed; "but at least it confirms my original prophecy. She hasn't given us all the letters, nor their correct order; but what she does give certainly fill in right. He took a pencil and wrote a line as follows:

"Samugi lov. . . ou."

"But why this sudden lack of interest in the solution of the problem?" he demanded. "Do you suppose that she can have puzzled it out for herself; that perhaps she's so ashamed of it she doesn't want me to know the truth?"

Valeska burst out into a laugh. "I saw Miss Quarich in a cab driving up Lexington-ave. this afternoon," she said; and added slyly, "with a man."

"Thompson, or Gerrish?" said Astro.

"It is Friday, isn't it?" she inquired demurely.

Astro sprang up. "By Jove! Samugi's day off! You don't mean to say she was with Samugi?"

"In a top hat," Valeska added with mirth; "which shows all you know about the human heart. I thought she looked at him rather soulfully that first day at the dinner. Only, I wanted to see what you knew of women."

"Less and less, every day," said he, with a mock mournful look.

The next Monday's paper contained an account of Miss Priscilla Quarich's elopement with her Japanese butler. Samugi's history was given, however, and it was one partly to reconcile the gossips with the scandal of the affair. His family, his war record, his academic achievements, all received sensational description. Society exclaimed, shrugged its shoulders, and forgot the affair next week. Astro's bill was paid with a yellow porcelain lion of an ancient dynasty, one of the seven left in the world.

VALESKA'S birthday came that week. She was in the studio when an expressman entered with a big basket filled with parcels all addressed to her. She opened them first with glee, then with increasing anxiety on her face. When the last package had been unwrapped and the papers carefully put away, she spent sometime sitting on the floor gazing at the thirteen several gifts. If there were tears in her eyes, Astro came too late to see them. He did not enter the studio, in fact, until after she had arranged the presents into three rows, in this way.

Astrachan furs	Lorgnon	Yeats' Poems
Slippers	Opal pin	Opera glasses
Thimble	Violets	"Undine"
Ruby Ring	Emerald brooch	
Orchids	Sash	

At the sound of his step in the outer hall, however, she swept the gifts together in a heap and jumped to her feet.

"Well," he said, as he entered, "I wish you a happy new year, my dear!"

She was still blushing. "Oh," she said, "I've just got so many beautiful, wonderful presents! They're simply lovely; but I can't understand why they were all sent to me at once." She looked away.

"And no idea where they came from, either, I suppose?"

She cast down her eyes. "I suppose only an oriental would be so munificent—and so mysterious."

He waited for more; but with a fluttering heart she left him hurriedly and went outside.

The next story of the Seer of Secrets, "The Fanshawe Ghost," will appear January 31.